Tells the Facts and Names the Names

CounterPunch

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Free Trade, God's Will

"Economists tend to hold [Pat Buchanan's anti-NAFTA views] with the sort of scorn biologists have for creationism, or the contempt doctors have for the theory that the HIV virus is unrelated to AIDS."

— Paul Blustein, *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1996

Clinton's Gangster Pal

On February 2, Attorney General Janet Reno announced that as a result of an agreement reached with the government, the Laborers' International Union of North America will hold elections this year for its top two officers, for the first time since the mob took over the union in the 1920s. Laborers' President Arthur Coia hailed the deal, saying the union "must remove any lingering question of taint or corruption ... We've made great strides in reforming this union, and we're grateful to the Justice Department for its cooperation". The press also greeted these tidings warmly. In *The New York Times*, Dirk Johnson said that reforms at the Laborers' had taken place due to "scrutiny from Federal prosecutors", and said that the deal would give the union "a chance to reform itself".

In fact, the deal struck by Justice leaves a man widely reported to have mob ties at the head of the Laborers'. Arthur Coia is one of Bill Clinton's closest friends in the labor movement and his union is a major contributor to the Democratic Party.

The remarkable story of Coia and his White House ties has been told only by Dean Starkman and several colleagues at the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*. The rest of the press has simply ignored this fragrant affair.

The Laborers', which has 700,000 members, mostly in construction and hospitals, has long been the most corrupt union in America, even worse than the pre-Ron Carey Teamsters. In 1986, a presidential commission laid bare the union's connections to the mob, saying that "organized crime had used its influence over the Laborers' to obtain workers' benefit funds" and to "provide no show jobs for [the mob]". The commission informed the Justice Department that a case was "waiting to be made".

The only time that a dissident faction challenged the Laborers' leadership, in 1981, its representatives were beaten on the convention floor. The union's secretary-treasurer at that time was Coia's father, who presided over the convention and railed against "outsiders" seeking to destroy the union as his minions pummeled the dissidents. Coia won reelection along with the rest of the incumbent slate by a vote of 2,342 to 5.

On November 4, 1994, following a three-year investigation, the Justice Department served the Laborers' with a 212-page draft complaint. The document, signed by Paul Coffey, head of Justice's organized crime and racketeering section and Assistant Attorney General Jo Ann Harris, a Clinton appointee, accused the union of having "an aura of criminality and pervasive lawlessness".

The complaint charged that Coia, who rose through the union ranks in Providence, Rhode Island, has "associated with and been controlled by organized crime figures". It accused him of pilfering union funds in an insurance scheme in the 1980s and of having helped a Mafia family in upstate New York divert funds from four union locals. The complaint also said Coia and other union officials had used "actual and threatened force, violence and fear" to seize funds from several locals in upstate New York. (In another link to the Mafia, though one not mentioned in the document, Coia once sought to mate his champion Rottweiler with a bitch owned by Raymond Patriarca of the New England mob).

The draft complaint recommended that the government place the Laborers' in a trusteeship, as had once been done with the Teamsters. It further recommended that Coia be permanently banned from the union. Just three months later, in February of 1995, the

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Justice Department had adopted a markedly different approach. Instead of a trusteeship, the government determined that the Laborers' should conduct its own internal clean-up. Coia was left in charge of the union. Laborers' dissidents say they will not be able to launch an effective challenge this year, so Coia will remain at the helm until at least the year 2001, the year of the next elections.

With the exception of the presidential and vice presidential posts, the 1995 agreement decrees that the rest of the Laborers' 13-member general executive board be elected under the old rules, whereby delegates at the union's convention select the leadership. Laborers' dissidents interviewed by the *Journal-Bulletin* were appalled by the deal. Chris White, an Alaska bus driver who was among those beaten at the 1981 convention, said the new rules allow only for "token democracy".

How was it that Coia and the Laborers' got off so easy? It happened in part because Coia recast himself as a crusading reformer. Shortly after Justice delivered its draft report, Coia suspended two Laborers' vice presidents, Samuel Caivano and John Serpico, who are suspected of having Mafia ties. The two men have since sued Coia, claiming that he threw them overboard in order to save himself. Coia also approved a union code of ethics that makes association with the mob grounds for dismissal.

In another move, Coia hired a former FBI agent, W. Douglas Gow, as the union's inspector general and charged him with rooting out corruption at the Laborers'. While Gow has taken some needed steps, the fact that he is paid by the union and reports directly to Coia and his board leaves doubt about his ability to investigate the top leadership. (Coia has also hired some high-priced lawyers, including Brendan Sullivan, Oliver North's handler during the Iran/contra hearings).

Within the union movement itself, Coia has also shifted gears. After briefly considering a challenge to AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland, Coia threw his support behind John Sweeney, who won the Federation's presidency at its 1995 convention. In one positive move, Coia created an energetic organizing department which has launched creative campaigns in the US.

But it has been Coia's vibrant ties to the White House that may have been decisive in the Justice Department's decision to forego a trusteeship and leave Coia in charge. Coia was one of the earliest labor backers of Clinton's health care plan and virtually alone among union leaders in supporting NAFTA. In addition, Coia:

- heads a union that loaned $100,000 to Clinton's inaugural committee and that is one of the Democratic Party's top ten donors.
- co-chaired with Robert Strauss, Vernon Jordan, Dwayne Andreas and Ronald Perelman a 1994 Democratic National Committee black-tie dinner which raised $3.5 million.
- joined with Garrison Keillor, Barbra Streisand, Sean Penn, Lloyd Cutler, Vidal Sassoon and Cyrus Vance, among others, in donating $1,000, the maximum allowed, to Clinton's legal defense fund for the Paula Jones and Whitewater affairs.
- pledged $100,000 in union money to the US Botanic Garden, one of Hillary Clinton's favorite charities.

Coia and the Clintons have also developed a personal friendship. The Laborers' leader commissioned Bob Hampton of Providence to design the president a golf club with the presidential seal built into the base (Clinton used the driver when he and former presidents Ford and Bush sent spectators scrambling for cover at the 1995 Bob Hope Classic).

On the same day that the Justice Department delivered its 212-page draft complaint to the Laborers', Clinton wrote a personal note to Coia. "Dear Arthur," the note began, "I just heard you've become a grandfather – congratulations! Thanks for the gorgeous driver – it's a work of art."

On February 13, 1995, exactly one week before Justice signed its deal with the Laborers', Hillary Clinton spoke at a Laborers' conference in Florida, invited there by Coia. Before she headed south, the White House counsel advised her that because Coia was "currently being investigated", the First Lady should avoid any "private meetings or conversations" with him.

On the same day Justice issued a report linking him to the mob, Coia got a warm note from Clinton.

The Justice Department says that its investigation of the Laborers' continues. The union is required to issue progress reports every 90 days, and if the department isn't satisfied it could still take the union over.

No one, not even Justice, disputes that the mob still has influence in the union. In 1995, Laborers' member Antonino Cucinotta, believed to be part of the Providence mob, killed two men at a social club for not showing him proper respect. A law firm which Coia founded represented Cucinotta in seeking to have his state disability benefits restored.

Meanwhile, Coia remains on the job and takes home a $220,000 yearly salary. He still drives a Ferrari, maintains two residences – one his family mansion overlooking Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island, the other a hotel suite Washington – and enjoys access to the highest circles of the Democratic Party. No wonder Coia recently told the *Journal-Bulletin* that these "are the best of times". ■

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Joe Browder's Secret Life

Joe Browder, who worked at the Interior Department under Jimmy Carter and later at Friends of the Earth, now heads a Beltway environmental consulting firm with his wife, Louise Dunlap. Browder offers himself as a fierce defender of the animal kingdom, telling a reporter that "Evidence of the public's caring about nature, public health and other environmental issues has never been stronger. At the same time, we see a lot of newly elected political leaders acting as if they have a compulsion to roll back environmental protection....That conflict is hard to reconcile."

Browder himself has little difficulty in reconciling conflict. We have learned that Browder's firm, which has represented Detroit Diesel, Custom Coals and Target Energy, also has a contract to flack for BHP, the Australian mining giant which has ravaged Papua New Guinea. The company has dumped 80,000 tons of toxic waste in the Ok Tedi River, resulting in a 70-kilometer stretch of it being declared "biologically dead" by the Australian Conservation Foundation.

In December, the *Multinational Monitor*, a Nader publication, named BHP one of the ten worst corporations of 1995. The magazine cited the death of the Ok Tedi and BHP's role in drafting legislation for the Papua New Guinea legislature in August of 1995 which would have made it a criminal offense to sue BHP for its environmental depredations. The following month a court found BHP in contempt for having helped write the law.

BHP was displeased about making the *Monitor*'s list. On January 2, company officials held a lengthy meeting to discuss a damage control strategy.

We know this because BHP accidentally faxed the meeting minutes to the *Monitor* – having confused the *Monitor*'s fax number with that of the minute's intended recipient, the fiery environmentalist Joe Browder. The company tried to repair the gaffe, calling the *Monitor* to explain that it had sent the memo on purpose because it wanted to "lay its cards on the table". That would be easier to swallow if Browder's name did not appear opposite to the *Monitor*'s fax number.

The minutes do not display Browder in a pleasing light. Responding to news that the *Monitor* is affiliated with Ralph Nader, Browder exults, "That's good, because if it's a Nader publication then that means the infection hasn't spread."

The BHP minutes also show Browder eager to vaunt his government contacts. Asked by a company official named Roger Nelson if BHP might get funding from the Agency for International Development, Browder replies that this could be a problem because of controversy over the mining company Freeport-McMoRan's plundering of rain forest in Irian Jaya in Indonesia. Freeport's activities, Browder laments, were "lumping all the mines in the region together in the minds of the environmental community".

"Green" secretly works for an Aussie mining giant which has ravaged Papua New Guinea.

Browder: "If it is true that AID funds the Irian Jaya environmental group, I think it would be pretty important for the guy who's in charge of that sort of thing for AID to understand that we do not fall under the same umbrella of problems."

Roger Nelson: "You're saying that we should take advantage of the network you have into USAID so that we separate ourselves from the Freeport view *just for the potential* [emphasis added] of what that might mean in the future."

Browder: "Yes."

In other words, to improve its chances of extracting AID money, BHP will strategically distance itself from Freeport. Later Browder adds, in the merciless bureaucratic argot of his trade: "If it looks like BHP has the kind of across-the-border collegial relations with the Freeport folks to be able to offer any kind of discreet, quiet help in dealing with the professionals who run AID programs and that sort of thing, so Freeport is understood not to be quite the monster that it's being portrayed to be, too, that's something that if you all decided was in the company's interest we might be able to offer as a way of lowering the temperature of the whole issue ... [If this becomes] a big issue, it's only going to spill over onto us."

This apologist for two particularly ruthless international firms heads the Everglades Coalition, a group whose stated goal is to protect the Florida Everglades from pollution caused by sugar growers. In 1994, Florida Governor Lawton Chiles pushed through a plan which limited the sugar growers to paying $322 million for a clean up program that will cost, at a minimum, $700 million.

Browder and other environmentalists swore vengeance but by last year, after Chiles promised to become "the state's environmental commander-in-chief", all was forgiven. The *Sun-Sentinel* of Fort Lauderdale provided this account:

"After months of rancor over an Everglades cleanup law that critics considered a sellout to the sugar industry, Gov. Lawton Chiles and many of the state's leading conservationists made up ... Chiles received two standing ovations from the coalition's general membership when he delivered the keynote address at the coalition's annual convention.... Joe Browder, chairman of the Everglades Coalition, said coming to terms with Chiles was important because many other challenges remain for people trying to preserve the Everglades. 'We're going to work together,' Browder said." ■

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Punch Bowl

Bernie the Rat

A great hue and cry has erupted over an op-ed piece CBS News's Bernard Goldberg wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, in which he charged that Americans don't trust the media because they are too liberal. As a wild-eyed radical, Goldberg singled out his CBS colleague, Eric Engberg, for having "set new standards for bias". Poor Engberg will now be closely monitored by his bosses, precisely as happened with Raymond Bonner, formerly of *The New York Times*, after Shirley Christian tarred him as a commie-symp back in the 1980s for reporting – correctly as it turned out – that the army in El Salvador had slaughtered hundreds of peasants at El Mozote.

Goldberg knows all about setting new standards for bias. Consider the following excerpt from an op-ed piece he wrote a few years ago in *The New York Times*:

"There are too many reporters out there who work the 'Victims America' beat. They specialize in uncritical stories about the 'downtrodden.' They act more like social workers than journalists ... The social worker/journalist ... feels right at home on the homeless beat. So what if many of the homeless are truly drug addicts or alcoholics or simply lazy? When the Victims America correspondent gets on the case, the plight of the homeless turns out to be society's fault – all our fault ...

"When there's a recession and workers get laid off, the press and television often portray them as innocent victims of bottom-line bosses or cold-hearted Presidents or even those wily Japanese. But how many stories have you seen on TV or read in the newspaper – in your entire life – that attempt to find out how many of these workers took their jobs seriously? How many thought kids who studied were wimps, and worse? How many, in short, brought about their own economic mess by not preparing for life in the real world."

Vive la France!

Now come reports from Panama that the US may have played an important role in assisting France with its recent series of nuclear blasts at Mururoa in the Pacific. In January, the Panamanian newspaper *La Prensa* published documents showing that the French embassy in Washington requested permission from the State Department for a DC-8 military plane en route from the French territory of Guadeloupe to stop at a US air base in Panama before heading on to Mururoa. *La Prensa* columnist Betty Brannan Jaen said another document indicated that the State Department granted permission to the French for the August 2 flight, as well as for a stopover during the return flight on August 5.

Brannan said she had no evidence that the French plane was carrying nuclear materials, but noted that the first French test on Mururoa took place in September. Furthermore, in 1987, after French planes carrying atomic materials were barred from overflying the US, President Francois Mitterand asked General Manuel Noriega to authorize France's nuclear-laden planes to fly through Panama. Noriega was happy to cooperate and a grateful Mitterand promptly awarded the dictator the title of commander in the Legion of Honor.

Last November, *The Washington Post* disclosed that scientists from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory were helping the French construct a $4 billion laser facility near Bordeaux for weapons-related research. "Even though the United States is no longer making its own bombs and has publicly criticized the French tests, US officials say [nuclear] cooperation is scheduled to expand to an unprecedented degree," the *Post* reported.

Good News

Our readers sometimes write to say that while they greatly enjoy **CounterPunch**, they'd appreciate some uplift from time to time, assuming any such commodity is available. Therefore, we're pleased to be the first to report that William Doherty – long-time head of the American Institute for Free Labor Development and a man whose career crimes we have previously documented – will be "retiring", aka forced to resign, next month. Though this shouldn't be interpreted as a commitment on the part of the AFL-CIO to solidarity with the international proletariat, it's at least a sign that there'll be some clean up of the international affairs department under new Federation chief John Sweeney. ■

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